

Camas post office will be put up for sale

□ USPS forges ahead with consolidation plans

By Heather Acheson
Post-Record staff

"For sale" signs will soon be posted at the downtown Camas post office.

According to Ron Anderson, public relations coordinator for the Portland postal district, United States Postal Service officials have decided to put the property on the market, the first step toward moving the services and 710 post

office boxes offered at the main downtown branch on Northeast Fifth Avenue, into an existing space in the Camas carrier annex located at 2455 S.E. Eighth Ave.

"Based on customer feedback and all of the other feedback, the post office is still pursuing the sale with the intention of consolidating," Anderson said on Friday. "There is a good possibility that folks will see 'for sale' signs in the main post office on Fifth Avenue as early as the next week to two weeks."

Although at least one petition and numerous letters opposing the move were sent to the USPS,

including those from the city, Downtown Camas Association and the Camas-Washougal Chamber of Commerce, Anderson said the final decision came down to the need to take actions toward operating more efficiently and cutting costs.

"The down economy is impacting everyone, including the post office," he said. "It just doesn't make sense to operate two separate locations that are in proximity to one another."

A formal letter from the USPS was sent out on Feb. 10 to those who submitted feedback about the potential closure during the

comment period, which ended Dec. 31.

"It is our intention to pursue the sale of the building located at 440 N.E. 5th Avenue and relocate retail and post office box operations to existing vacant space in the Camas carrier annex located at 2455 S.E. 8th Avenue (just 1.5 miles from the current facility)," wrote P.V. Carcasses, USPS consumer affairs manager, in the letter. "We believe this site will provide the community with an upgraded facility that offers a safe working environment for our employees and the level of service expected by our

customers."

The Eighth Avenue annex is tucked behind Gunderson Les Schwab Tire Center. It first opened in 1999 and is currently used primarily as a home base where carriers pick up mail for their home delivery routes, and for customers to pick up packages. If the downtown location were sold, a new retail center would be built at the facility to include a service counter, lobby and post office boxes.

Carrie Schulstad, co-owner of The Uncommon Gift and member

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of the DCA, said she was disappointed to hear the news. She was among those who helped organize a petition that collected 340 signatures from people who were in support of keeping the main post office open.

"I feel that this a huge blow to downtown and that it unfortunately could affect commerce downtown," Schulstad said. "It certainly will affect the culture of Camas and threaten preservation of a historic building."

The Fifth Avenue building first opened as a post office in 1939, and has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1991.

Chamber Executive Director Brent Erickson commented that the facility draws a significant amount of consistent, daily foot

and vehicle traffic to the downtown area. Local merchants who are already struggling in the poor economy would feel its absence.

"The closure of the post office will have a major impact on the downtown businesses," he said. "It's another economic hit, and the new location is an inconvenience to the more than 120 downtown businesses that are in the core area."

Erickson said the downtown area that surrounds the main post office already has 11 empty building spaces, the most at one time since 2001 when there were nine.

A letter from the city of Camas opposing the action, signed by Mayor Paul Dennis and Community Development Director Phil Bourquin, said the

consolidation of the two post offices would be detrimental to the city, and come at a substantial cost to the USPS.

According to the letter, if the carrier annex's uses were expanded as planned the USPS would be responsible for paying an estimated \$450,000 in impact fees and meeting permitting requirements.

"Finally, and perhaps of most importance to the city, the Camas main post office has served not only as a significant physical landmark, but also as a place of pride and service to both our city's residents and business community for decades," the letter stated.

"Closure of the main post office would represent a loss in culture, commerce and community that cannot be replicated."

The announcement about

the imminent sale and consolidation comes at a time when the USPS is struggling. The national mail system is self-sustaining; it receives no tax subsidy for operating expenses and relies on the sale of postage, products and services to fund its operations.

In November 2009, it was announced that the USPS would endure an estimated net loss of \$3.8 billion at the end of 2009, despite drastic cost cutting efforts of \$6 billion during the year. These cuts included 40,000 career USPS employees as well as reductions in overtime hours, transportation and other costs.

Anderson said that between the two Camas locations, there are approximately 30 employees. Most are letter carriers, and about four work out of the main downtown office. No local layoffs are planned.